



NEWS FROM NOAA

NATIONAL OCEANIC & ATMOSPHERIC ADMINISTRATION • US DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE

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NOAA SEEKS COMMENT ON THE INCIDENTAL HARASSMENT OF MARINE MAMMALS IN THE ARCTIC OCEAN

NOAA Fisheries Service is seeking comment on a request from U.S. oil industries, for the incidental harassment of marine mammals that may result from seismic surveys in the Chukchi and Beaufort seas off Alaska during 2006.

Two major oil companies, Shell and ConocoPhillips, and the seismic company GX Technology plan to conduct several thousand miles of seismic air gun surveys off the Alaskan coast this summer to assess the potential for future offshore oil and gas production. Air gun arrays towed behind seismic service vessels collect data that reveal potential petroleum reserves below the sea floor.

Towed by cables, underwater microphones (hydrophones) collect seismic data and can stretch up to six miles in length. Because seismic air guns—devices that release highly compressed air into water—produce above ambient level sounds that could potentially affect marine mammals, companies performing these activities are required to obtain an authorization from NOAA under the Marine Mammal Protection Act.

To help protect marine mammals including belugas and the endangered bowhead whale in the proximity of these activities, the oil industry utilizes mitigation and monitoring measures including observations by trained biologists. Seismic crews establish safety zones and air gun “soft-starts”—an application that involves activating air guns in sequence rather than operating all at once—to protect marine mammals from serious injury. Companies will also support aerial- and vessel-based surveys to assess marine mammal activity and numbers near survey areas. If a whale or seal is sighted within the designated safety area, seismic activities are postponed until the animal leaves the area.

NOAA Fisheries Service has preliminarily determined that seismic surveys will not result in more than a negligible impact on marine mammal stocks and would not have an immitigable impact on native Alaskan subsistence hunts for marine mammals.

NOAA’s Fisheries Service will accept comments on the Shell application and proposed authorization through June 2, 2006; the ConocoPhillips application through June 12, 2006, and the GXT application approximately on June 19, 2006. Comments should be addressed to: Michael Payne, Chief, Permits, Conservation and Education Division, Office of Protected Resources, NOAA Fisheries Service, 1315 East-West Highway, Silver Spring, MD 20910.

To obtain a copy of the application and *Federal Register* notice contact the office previously mentioned or via the Internet at: <http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/pr/permits/incidental.htm>

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NOAA Fisheries Service is dedicated to protecting and preserving our nation's living marine resources and their habitats through scientific research, management and enforcement. NOAA Fisheries Service provides effective stewardship of these resources for the benefit of the nation, supporting coastal communities that depend upon them, and helping to provide safe and healthy seafood to consumers and recreational opportunities for the American public.

NOAA, an agency of the U.S. Department of Commerce, is dedicated to enhancing economic security and national safety through the prediction and research of weather and climate-related events and providing environmental stewardship of the nation's coastal and marine resources. Through the emerging Global Earth Observation System of Systems (GEOSS), NOAA is working with its federal partners, 61 countries and the European Commission to develop a global network that is as integrated as the planet it observes, predicts and protects.

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On the Web:

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